



Graduate Research School

Te Kura Rangahau Tāura

Perspectives on quality candidates

The following perspectives present a summary of the results from a survey of supervisors conducted in 2008 at the University of Otago. Supervisors of PhD and thesis Masters candidates were asked to list the most important qualities of the ideal graduate research candidate and the most substantial shortcomings that affect satisfactory progress.

The research was conducted by Julie Dlaskova and Romain Miroso of the University's Quality Advancement Unit, with the assistance of Dr Tamar Murachver of the Department of Psychology.

The 10 Most Important Qualities of the Ideal Graduate Research Candidate

1. Intelligence

- Intelligence (including academic ability, intellect, brightness and common sense) was the most common quality associated with the ideal graduate research candidate.
- *"They need to be bright with a good dose of common sense for work in a research laboratory."*
- *"The best students are those who are bright enough and motivated enough to work independently and submit high quality prose."*

2. Independence / Confidence

- The ability to work and think independently is one of the basic prerequisites for studying a research degree. Qualities associated with independence were confidence, initiative and the ability to take responsibility.
- *"They should be able to work with minimal supervision, but that does not mean that the supervisor is not available for discussions on the research being undertaken."*
- *"Independence of thought is a key attribute that has to develop as the PhD progresses"*
- *"The student should ideally be able to work independently and develop their own questions and pursue their own lines of thought."*

3. Commitment

- Almost half of the supervisors mentioned commitment (to gain knowledge, to complete work or to do well) as the key to successful research degree completion. Other expressions illustrating commitment were perseverance, persistence, determination, dedication, tenacity, resilience and endurance.
- *"The most important qualities a PhD candidate will need are perseverance and commitment, probably more so than raw intelligence."*
- *"All of the qualities are important for the student to get the most out of their research degree; but if*

they have a high level of commitment (I REALLY want to do this, and well) then the rest will usually follow".

4. Literacy / numeracy

- Literacy, mostly described as good writing and language skills as well as the ability to express and organise ideas, is highly valued by most supervisors. Some supervisors also require their students to have essential statistical and mathematical skills.
- *"I think that writing ability is very important - it wastes a lot of my time (and the student's) if we have to spend a lot of effort and time on correcting drafts."*
- *"Literacy is on the list simply because time pressures don't allow a student the luxury of a lack of writing skill to start with, however writing can be taught."*

5. Time management / organisational skills

- The ideal research degree student is organised, can plan their work, meets deadlines, pays attention to detail and meets regularly with supervisors. Overall they have good study and work habits.
- *"A good student is one who works hard, plans their programme of work (with advice) and has the imagination to see the beauty and fascination of a research topic and then to write clearly and precisely about what he or she has discovered."*

6. Curiosity / ability to learn

- A valued quality in research degree students is intellectual curiosity and the willingness and ability to learn new things. This curiosity includes having an inquiring and open mind, as well as flexibility and adaptability.
- *"A good graduate student is not necessarily the one with the top grades but the one who is willing to ask questions, to challenge what they are told but is also [able] to take advice".*
- *"The best students will also have real intrinsic curiosity about the world and about their project."*
- *"The ideal thesis student for me is someone who brings a strong sense of intellectual curiosity to their project and who is willing and able to translate that curiosity into a dedicated course of study".*

7. Enthusiasm and passion

- A successful student is enthusiastic, passionate and has a deep interest in the subject or research.
- *"For me, the desire to do research and a passion for the field of inquiry are key, but they are not the only things needed."*
- *"Although academic background is essential it is not sufficient in the absence of dedication and enthusiasm and communication skill".*
- *"In my opinion the most important properties are a commitment to work hard, and when problems are encountered to be able to look at them from many angles and find logical solutions. Generally these traits will only come with a strong passion for the work they are doing".*

8. Ability to think

- The ability to think refers to the capacity to develop necessary research skills including the ability

to analyze, synthesize, conceptualise, develop an argument and think critically. Ideal students can think broadly ('get the big picture'), laterally and logically.

- *"An ideal student is marked by an ability to think, ask questions, and look for the answers in research, and be prepared to write and argue about them (in writing and with supervisors)".*
- *"The student should be able to think both at the metalevel and at the object level, in other words both about the general coarse-grained aspects of relevance and broad patterns, and at the fine-grained level of intricate details".*

9. Hard working/ diligence

- Studying a research degree requires diligence and hard work. Strong work ethics, discipline, focus, efficiency and professionalism are all necessary for successful study and research.
- *"PG study is hard work and dedication. Having a life while studying is also important. The best students have a balance to their lives where they work hard but enjoy their time at university too."*
- *"Hard working and paying attention to supervisors' advice are highly required."*

10. Motivation

- Good research students have strong reasons for pursuing a PhD or Master's degree; they are ambitious and highly motivated to learn new things and get a graduate degree.
- *"I think one reason why so many students take too long to complete is because they are not pursuing a PhD for the right reason (or for any reason at all)"*
- *"Self-motivation is the essential ingredient that will help make even the more challenged students successful."*
- *"Although high-intelligence (good exam marks) are required prior to commencing graduate research I would rate motivation as the most important factor."*
- *"A candidate for a PhD must WANT to do it, and be a self-starter."*

The 10 Most Substantial Shortcomings Affecting Satisfactory Progress

1. Lack of commitment and focus

- Lack of commitment or over commitment (with outside interests or employment) are considered the most serious shortcomings in students' study progress. Staying focused on the goal, staying directed, dedicated and determined are fundamental prerequisites to successful research degree completion according to more than half of the supervisors surveyed.
- *"It is very frustrating to have an able student who is overcommitted or poorly organised."*

2. Doesn't take advice / communicate with a supervisor

- Supervisors appreciate the importance of communication with their students and seek to provide them with valuable feedback and advice. Not following their advice, not accepting constructive criticism and avoiding feedback are characteristics supervisors believe impede the students' quality of work and overall study progress.
- *"I have had students confuse constructive criticism with 'positive comments.' It is hard to hear negative things about your work, but the best students take these on board and try to improve."*
- *"Poor interaction with others including with their supervisor. This could be on either side, of*

course, but students who become 'hermits' and refuse to interact or discuss their work are at a major disadvantage."

3. Poor writing and language skills / inadequate numeracy skills

- Poor writing and language skills are often problematic, especially at the later stages of the research process. Almost half of the supervisors highlighted the importance of competent writing skills for successful research degree completion.
- *"I think anyone can be a good thesis student if they really want to and if they are prepared to commit the time to acquiring the necessary prerequisite skills – including the ability to write."*
- *"lack of ability to write well in English is a big problem for social science research."*

4. Lack of independence

- Students are required to take ownership of their projects, be proactive and work independently. Failure to do so is perceived as a substantial shortcoming to successful degree completion. This lack of independence goes hand in hand with characteristics such as lack of confidence and initiative, reliance on others, fear of failure or defensiveness.
- *"The most difficult students to work with for me are those who shy away from complex questions, who are unable to develop their own projects and expect to be spoon-fed by their supervisors in all aspects of the process (topic formation, literature review, argument, structure, etc.), and who do not meet deadlines and are generally unreliable and disengaged."*

5. Poor time management and organisational skills

- An important part of pursuing a PhD or Master's degree is the ability to plan and prioritise work, meet deadlines and deliver work on time. Other valued organisational skills include paying attention to detail, setting clear goals and good record keeping habits. A lack of these skills is perceived of as a significant shortcoming to effective research degree study.
- *"Time management skills and enthusiasm are the attributes that really separate the excellent thesis students from the rest".*
- *"Limited time management skills will halt the most intelligent person."*

6. Laziness and procrastination

- Avoidance, procrastination, laziness, bare-minimum approach, lack of self-discipline, inability to work consistently, expecting results without great effort, poor work ethic, and not progressing steadily are all characteristics identified by supervisors as common impediments to degree completion. Steady and dedicated work habits are very important to successful research degree study.
- *"It is difficult to deal with a student who says they will do the work but ends up socialising instead. Students don't understand that they must drive their project forward."*
- *"Research is tough and the student has to work hard to make progress. People who can't work with those around them or who struggle to communicate find it hard."*

7. Lack of or wrong motivation

- The message from supervisors was clear: pursuing a research degree without the right motivation can negatively affect the students' desire and drive to complete the work.
- *"If what the student wants to achieve by enrolling for postgrad study is not clear it can be hard to*

motivate the student to complete in a timely fashion."

- *"Often students who are in school for reasons other than a strong commitment to academic life (e.g. parents told them to come; only want a qualification/job but not to do the required work; haven't got anything better to do, so decide to go to 'grad school'; etc) are the ones who falter. Students with a clear goal (e.g. to get a PhD and become an academic, for example) and reason (e.g. because they truly love XX) seem to do better because they are self-motivated".*

8. Lack of intelligence / academic ability

- Studying towards a research degree is perceived as an advanced step in an academic career;
- not all students have the ability and skills to take such a step. Academic ability and intelligence are a "must" for successful research degree completion.
- *"Some students have scraped through an undergrad degree but don't have what it takes to manage a large amount of material and a data base for research purposes".*

9. Lack of curiosity and ability to learn

- Supervisors appreciate students who are willing to learn. Narrow vision, rigid thinking, lack of curiosity, a closed mind, not being able to think broadly and intellectual inflexibility are all seen as factors that constrain the research process.
- *"Lack of initiative in going beyond the original topic and supervisors' ideas, to see new opportunities for discovery."*
- *"Many students seem to think that their supervisor somehow has the answer. If we did, the question probably wouldn't be worth asking. The project belongs to them and they need to take responsibility for it."*

10. Lack of enthusiasm and passion

- Lack of enthusiasm and drive, loss of interest in the topic or fading motivation all impact on students' desire and ability to complete their research degree successfully.
- *"Lack or loss of interest is definitely the biggie here"*
- *"All graduate students (and their supervisors) have low periods when things go poorly and motivation is lower. But if the student is genuine in their desire to conduct research they can get through these."*